

HELLINGER FAMILY SYSTEMS THERAPY

Bert Hellinger is an 80-year old German psychoanalyst and psychotherapist who has worked for many years with families and different cultures all over the world, and noticed similarities. He takes and develops theories from his many years of training and experience, which include the discovery of the repetition of family dynamics and history, training in psychodrama and family sculpture work. He has evolved an entirely new and effective way of understanding and healing family difficulties and trauma.

It is not family therapy as the title may suggest that offers group therapy and support to family members of people in treatment. Hellinger-work is very effective for all in recovery, clients and families, who usually attend workshops on their own. The anxiety and pain as a result of, or perhaps prior to addiction, is sometimes very hard to heal. There can be family of origin issues, co-dependency, abandonment, anger and pain, shame and guilt, broken relationships, needing to be addressed in treatment and recovery.

Many professionals including doctors, medical staff, therapists, educators and counsellors are becoming trained to facilitate workshops. To understand more about the work, it is really best to attend a workshop.

As far back as 1974 Murray Bowen introduced the analogy of "homoeostasis" within a family system, and the need to consider the whole family. If the alcoholic or addict changes and recovers, this alters the "homoeostasis" which often leads to confusion and a different set of problems. This is where Hellinger work can help both addict and family.

Hellinger noted that within any family there a strong tendency to use our strength to hold onto problems rather than being able to move into solutions. For example, the addict in treatment often finds it difficult to allow change and recovery. Why should it seem preferable to us to continue to suffer than to heal? Hellinger believes we do this with a love and strong loyalty to our family. Although we may be very angry and hurt, it is this love's energy that keeps us entangled (co-dependent). It is the same energy that heals but needs to be expressed at a different level of consciousness.

Within the family there is this loyalty, a fellowship of fate felt strongly by sons and daughters towards their parents, between siblings and between partners. Through an underlying need for balance and compensation within the system and to maintain loyalty and connection with the family, those who gain any advantage (ie recovery perhaps) may feel guilt and even sabotage their progress. *The addict often takes up a certain role of being the 'scapegoat' within the family system, bearing the "label" so that others do not have to.*

Problems, unhappiness, illness, even though painful, give us a sense of belonging with our family. This gives a very clear explanation of the problems of co-dependency. If we find a solution, there may be a price to pay in that we no longer feel as close and lose the sense of belonging. The result is guilt and loneliness. We feel we have abandoned those we love, however we can learn to love by being involved but not entangled. By taking our family fully into our hearts, just as they are, we can feel free, and this is what the Hellinger-work sets out to achieve.

In a workshop participants sit in a circle and introduce themselves. A client may then begin by describing their particular problem to the facilitator and will be asked quite simply, "What do you want from the work?"

The therapist collects information about the important people and events in the client's life and family. Simple facts are required; details of how people got on with each other and what they did or did not do are not relevant. This is phenomenological work.

An important question to ask is if a family member has died young or in tragic circumstances (often the case in the addict's family) in other words, "*Is anyone missing or forgotten about?*" Also if there are family "secrets", if anyone has left the family or is excluded, disowned, not acknowledged because of family feuds or shame, somebody more vulnerable within the family system will invariably be affected in an adverse way.

When (as in the family of an addict) a child feels very responsible for a parent, this creates a lack of personal growth, even illness. Hellinger calls this kind of responsibility "blind loyalty" (again, the other word for this could be "co-dependency"). The work would involve transforming this "blind loyalty" to an "enlightened loyalty" that is healthier for all concerned.

The constellation evolves in two parts. The first is getting to the root of the problem or "entanglement", which may involve bringing in other family members as the work continues. The second part of the work is to restore the correct order to the system, giving a place to anyone missing or unacknowledged and finding the good place within the constellation where representatives feel most comfortable. This is confirmed by watching the body language and reactions of the family representatives. This allows the energy to flow in the right direction towards the most vulnerable in the family system.

Hellinger's phenomenological approach acknowledges the natural "orders" within a family that need to be obeyed, recognising and accepting the hierarchy of the family members, those who have died and those still present. With this knowledge, tensions and "entanglements" can be resolved.

Representatives are not encouraged to act out anger or confront or put interpretations on the actions of another. It is only necessary to see where the original pain and entanglement occurred within the family which may have gone back a few generations. The facilitator will ensure that the client is given the right support. No one is "over-flooded" and no one is under pressure to do more than they feel possible. People only work their constellations if they have a real desire to do it and they choose whatever they want/need to explore. Because the client does not enter into the constellation at first while the problem is being explored, s/he is not thrown back into the pain of the problem and all the attendant feelings, but will take his/her place when a better or healing solution begins to become evident.

In constellation work the client takes in information at a deeper level than is possible with "talking" therapy: at a deeper "heart" level than rather than an intellectual level. Because clients have the opportunity to gain a revised and wider perspective on the problem, and a much greater understanding of the family dynamic, they can begin to relate differently to the family which positively impacts everyone. This can lead to resolution, bringing physical and emotional relief that continues to have an effect over a long period of time.

The work fits in well with the 12-step programme of recovery. There needs to be a desire to want change; to accept "what is" instead of what might have been or holding unrealistic ideas of controlling other people to fit in with what we or others might want. There is a need to accept responsibility for oneself and not try to take responsibility for others which proves impossible. Guilt and shame can be removed, motivation instilled, and above all, a feeling of hope for the future.

(1900 words)

Christine Wilson Foley, MSc

UKCP registered psychotherapist

Certified Addiction Counsellor

For details of workshops:-

01442 391737

07971 881557

Biography:

- (1) Ivan Boszormeyi-Nagy, G M Spark, Invisible Loyalties, 1973, pub Harper & Row*
- (2) Martin Buber, I and Thou, 1996, pub Simon & Schuster*
- (3) Ursula Franke, In My Mind's Eye, 2003, pub Carl-Auer-Systeme-Verlag*
- (4) Hellinger, Gunthard Weber & Hunter Beaumont, Love's Hidden Symmetry, 1998, Zeig Tucker*
- (5) Bert Hellinger & Gabriele ten Hovel, Acknowledging What Is, 1999, pub Zeig Tucker*
- (6) Jakob Levy Moreno, Psychodrama Vols 1, 2 & 3, pub Beacon House, New York*
- (7) Virginia Satir, Conjoint Family Therapy, 1964, pub Science & Behaviour Books*
- (8) Rupert Sheldrake, The Presence of the Past: A New Science of Life, 1982, pub J P Tarcher*
- (9) Murray Bowen, Family Systems Therapy, 1974*

If the movement of energy is from daughter or son to parent, to grand-parent, or towards somebody who has been rejected, disowned or forgotten by the family system, there will be discord, lack of harmony or even illness. This is very common in families suffering from addiction.

A client may sense a feeling of being cut-off, separate, not belonging, out of place, or wanting a different and better relationship with someone in the family, or feeling guilt and shame because of the addiction. The work helps bring to light entanglements, suffering, hurt and pain, and opens the way to a solution. If it can be even partially resolved, the client will feel more supported. It is emphasised that the client is the person who chooses what s/he wants to work on.

As the constellation continues, the facilitator will ask each representative for feedback about physical sensations, feelings and awareness. These statements lead to the facilitator beginning to make changes in the constellation placements. More representatives can be added to stand in for other people who may impact the system. Eventually the client will take their place in the constellation and the one who has been representing them will withdraw.

Representatives are not encouraged to act out anger or confront or put interpretations on the actions of another. It is only necessary to see where the original pain and entanglement occurred within the family which may have gone back a few generations. The facilitator will ensure that the client is given the right support. No one is "over-flooded" and no one is under pressure to do more than they feel possible. People only work their constellations if they have a real desire to do it and they choose whatever they want/need to explore. Because the client does not enter into the constellation at first while the problem is being explored, s/he is not thrown back into the pain of the problem and all the attendant feelings, but will take his/her place when a better or healing solution begins to become evident.

I had the privilege of being invited to a treatment centre "Open Minds" in Chester in April, to lead a weekend workshop, and another was held in London at the beginning of June. Clients of all ages and length of time in recovery attended. One man who worked had been in treatment for only a week, while others ranged in recovery from a couple of months to one or two years, having been invited back as part of Aftercare group to take part. Some were on the point of leaving treatment and going back to their families.

In constellation work the client takes in information at a deeper level than is possible with "talking" therapy: at a deeper "heart" level than rather than an intellectual level. Because clients have the opportunity to gain a revised and wider perspective on the problem, and a much greater understanding of the family dynamic, they can begin to relate differently to the family which positively impacts everyone. This can lead to resolution, bringing physical and emotional relief that continues to have an effect over a long period of time.

The work fits in well with the 12-step programme of recovery. There needs to be a desire to want change; to accept "what is" instead of what might have been or holding unrealistic ideas of controlling other people to fit in with what we or others might want. There is a need to accept responsibility for oneself and not try to take responsibility for others which proves impossible. Guilt and shame can be removed, motivation instilled, and above all, a feeling of hope for the future.

(1900 words)

Christine Wilson Foley, MSc

UKCP registered psychotherapist
Accredited Addiction Counsellor

For details of workshops:-

01442 391737

07971 881557

Biography:

- (1) Ivan Boszormeyi-Nagy, G M Spark, Invisible Loyalties, 1973, pub Harper & Row*
- (2) Martin Buber, I and Thou, 1996, pub Simon & Schuster*
- (3) Ursula Franke, In My Mind's Eye, 2003, pub Carl-Auer-Systeme-Verlag*
- (4) Bert Hellinger, Gunthard Weber & Hunter Beaumont, Love's Hidden Symmetry, 1998, pub Zeig Tucker*
- (5) Bert Hellinger & Gabriele ten Hovel, Acknowledging What Is, 1999, pub Zeig Tucker*
- (6) Jakob Levy Moreno, Psychodrama Vols 1, 2 & 3, pub Beacon House, New York*
- (7) Virginia Satir, Conjoint Family Therapy, 1964, pub Science & Behaviour Books*
- (8) Rupert Sheldrake, The Presence of the Past: A New Science of Life, 1982, pub J P Tarcher*
- (9) Murray Bowen, Family Systems Therapy, 1974*

CLIENTS' REPORTS OF HELLINGER WORKSHOPS IN CHESTER AND LONDON

1ST CLIENT

This client had a very fraught violent relationship with his younger brother and for a long while they had had no contact with each other. He also worried that he was rejected by the rest of his family. The work in the constellation was to explore the possibility of re-establishing good relationships with the family and gain their support in recovery, as well as feeling able to write to his younger brother.

He set up his family constellation with himself and his brother standing apart from the family, and it was possible to effect integration with the family and gain everyone's support so that he no longer felt the "Black Sheep". Since the constellation work he has written to his younger brother and now feels he has the full support of the rest of the family in his recovery, building bridges. The work enabled him to approach them in an open, honest and non-defensive manner. He says this would not have been possible at this stage without the help of the constellation work.

2ND CLIENT

This client felt very anxious about leaving treatment was able to gain a wider perspective on his family and to see things in a different light, with more understanding. He set up his family constellation and placed himself right outside of it, facing the opposite way. He was able to work through a lot of emotion such as anxiety, grief, rejection, sadness, which left him more present and free to restore relationships with parents and siblings, unhindered by a great deal of baggage from the past.

3RD CLIENT

This client says that in doing the work he began to understand his family's problems from another more positive viewpoint and helped him to look at the situation differently. He says that this has definitely improved communication with his family and made it easier to relate to them. He had major problems with his sister, whom he has seen since the constellation work, and the relationship was much improved. He has also been more relaxed with his daughter because he is able to look at the relationship differently.

4TH CLIENT

This client was on the point of leaving treatment and returning to her children who had been fostered separately with different family members. She was very anxious and nervous about how she would be received by them, whether they would be angry and reject her. The constellation was such a positive experience for her she said she was "gobsmacked and stunned". She had never experienced anything like it before and was impressed. The family process was so true and real, and she felt much relief and peace afterwards. She enjoyed the experience.

LONDON WORKSHOP

(All names have been changed to preserve anonymity)

1. Stella was having problems in her second marriage because she felt her husband had such a close co-dependent relationship with his only child from his first marriage, a daughter. Stella felt his daughter always came first and was angry and resentful about this, feeling left out. In the constellation she began to see the step-daughter's situation from an entirely different perspective and she felt more open in reaching out towards her.

As a postscript to this piece of work, on the second day of the workshop we brought in Stella's younger daughter who finally felt able to join the new family and create a more balanced dynamic. Sue reports that since returning home she is much more open to forming a better relationship with her step-daughter and more relaxed about the problems. She no longer has the feeling of being left out.

2. Penny felt that she and her husband were not very close, and she resented the amount of financial and material help he had always given their two daughters, especially the youngest. She also mentioned that she had had a very similar relationship with her father. The constellation brought to light that she still carried a great deal of suppressed grief at her father's death. This may have been blocking her from feeling close to her husband because she felt no-one could measure up to her father. It also revealed that Penny's husband had been trying to emulate her father and live up to his image by being the same kind of wonderful father in turn.

3. Peter felt guilt and sadness about not being there for his first family because of his alcoholism. He had had two sons by his first marriage, but had left the family because of his drinking. His two sons had grown up without him. In recovery he had re-married and had two more sons. All was well with his new family but he felt very guilty and sad because of the effect of his drinking on his former wife and older sons, and not being a good father to them. He felt this guilt interfered with the relationship with his two younger sons. In the constellation it was demonstrated that his wife had been able to move on and felt no ill-will towards Peter. Some very healing work was done between the sons and their father, one of whom had previously felt very rejected and abandoned.

4. Mary related that her parents had married against their respective parents' wishes, and the marriage had been unhappy. There were three children of the marriage, 2 sons and Mary, the youngest. They had all become addicts. The two brothers had bullied and tormented Mary, and were very angry, the second brother more especially. The eldest brother had been named after his father's brother, who had died in a drowning accident aged 11. Another of their father's brothers had also died quite young. The constellation brought out the frozen grief of their father, and his emotional absence owing to blocked guilt and grief over losing his two brothers, especially the younger one. His younger son, Mary's brother, was especially angry about this, and in many ways he identified with the brother who had drowned and felt he had been expected to take his place, but could not. When the constellation allowed some of the frozen grief, guilt and anger to be identified and worked through, there was a much more comfortable acceptance between Mary and her brothers. Mary felt more understanding of her brothers' feelings, and the source of the anger. This is helpful in being able to live more in the present and move forward.

5. Linda is the youngest of five children, 3 brothers and 2 sisters. Their mother was very strict Catholic, and their father had died of a heart attack when Louise was 10. She had heard her father having the heart attack in the bathroom, but nobody ever talked about it afterwards. Her mother froze in her grief, and turned even more towards the Church for strength and support, away from the children. She was quite unable to give anything emotionally. Linda wanted to be able to feel closer to her four siblings who had all left home as soon as possible, and had never been close. They were particularly angry about their mother turning towards the Church. Her older brother was expected to look after Linda after their father died, and he felt very burdened and resentful, being only 18 at the time. The constellation illustrated how their mother had "died inside" at the loss of her husband, and was quite unable to reach out to her children. When a representative for her husband was placed next to her, this showed clearly how she had been affected by his death. In the constellation she became more understanding and sympathetic towards her children. Linda herself at this stage was able to turn to her siblings and connect with them. The family system "warmed up" by the presence of the father, and the siblings were able to give each other the support and warmth which had been lacking. This is evident when the energy in the family constellation is flowing in the right direction. When Linda reached a deeper understanding of just how the family had been impacted by her father's death, and with a newer picture in her heart of what could be possible, this opens up the movement towards

better relationships in future. If one person in the family changes the rest of the family can similarly adjust.

6. Dee had never felt "good enough" and just wanted to feel more comfortable with herself. Her father had been an alcoholic who had finally found recovery, although Dee by this time had left home and married. She had yearned for her father's love and attention, wanting to be close to him, having an unfulfilled image of being able as a little girl to sit on his lap and cuddle him. Her self-esteem had been badly damaged, growing up as a child in an alcoholic family. There was much sadness and guilt within the family about their father's drinking and suppressed grief at his death. This was released in the constellation, and this grief work enables the person concerned to bring more positive energy to the present. Some work was also done between Dee and her father that would begin to raise her self-esteem and acceptance of herself.

(1506 words)